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Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture. Jane Naomi Iwamura. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. h/bk 214 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-973860-1. Price $99.00.

Orientalism manifests in a variety of expressive forms. When Eastern cultures encounter American cultures, the cultural, socio-political, economic, and gender politics underlying the dynamics between East and West determine that the East is defined, interpreted, and represented by Western imperialism and hegemony. The Orient only exists as circumscribed by the West, defined on binary terms where the West is always dominant, as images and portrayals of the exotic, and barbarous Asian characters continue to be produced in literary works and popular media. After the publication of Edward Said's canonical *Orientalism*. a great deal of scholarly research and exploration has been conducted on how Orientalism frames the narrative and political discourses in literary works, but little scholarly attention has been devoted to visual media representations in popular cultur.

Jane Naomi Iwamura's lucid and enlightening book *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* offers valuable insights into American popular culture's stereotypical visual representation of Asian religions and spirituality through the creation of the Oriental Monk motif and character. *Virtual Orientalism* reveals a school of Orientalism informed by the cultural politics and power dynamics between America and Asia, in the sense that the portrayal of Asia and Asian religions is always socially defined and politically contextualized. Due to the ubiquity and seemingly positive depiction of Asia and Asian culture, this particular brand of Orientalism has a firm hold "on Western imagination by limiting alternative possibilities," and this "cultural stereotyping by visual forms of media is an important element" in Visual Orientalism (7).

The narrative of the Oriental Monk typically involves a lone monk figure who takes under his protection and training an orphaned or fatherless young child, who becomes a bridge figure that combines the "Oriental wisdom and spiritual insight" with the dominant cultural heritage, and provides vitality and hope for the corrupted, brutal, and spiritless West (20). Despite this seemingly positive media representation of Asian spirituality, however, it constructs a modernized cultural patriarchy, in

which Anglo-Americans reimagine themselves as the protectors, innovators, and guardians of Asian religions and culture (21). Virtual Orientalism (as epitomized by the Oriental Monk), constitutes a representational strategy through which dominant American cultures can safely contain and manage potentially threatening Asian cultures and religion. By portraying Asian spiritualities in a culture-specific manner, popular media re-configures them into "recognizable and acceptable" forms so that they are incorporated in American culture (232).

Virtual Orientalism's investigation onto the different media configurations of the Oriental Monk figure starts with the Japanese Zen master, embodied in Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, who visited the United States in the 1940s and 1950s and greatly promoted the establishment of Zen Buddhism in America. Iwamura carefully traces Zen Buddhism's ascension on the cultural ladder in the 1950s, from both Suzuki's personal attraction as a scholar and cultural artist and American popular culture's fascination with the particular aspects of Zen that Suzuki promulgate. Contextualized by Zen's decline in Japan and a cultural propensity to Zen Buddhism among Japanese Americans, Suzuki's travel from the East to the West trying to find a Western pupil to carry on his spiritual legacy fitted the Oriental Monk bill perfectly. His journey "helped legitimate a new ideological center for Zen" in America, and it ultimately "authorized the transfer of Zen spirituality from Asian master to white pupil" (62).

While the Zen master offers spiritual perceptiveness, the Indian Guru Maharishi Mahesh Yoji promotes more concrete tenets such as inner peace, meditation, and a joyful life attitude to an America that was disgusted by war in the late 1960s. As the spiritual leader of the Transcendental Meditation movement, Mahesh associated with celebrities such as The Beatles and a youth culture that defined a lifestyle and choice in the visual media. Thus, the Oriental Monk motif in Mahesh's cultural signification "brought forth a new authorial framework that featured pop celebrity as legitimating force and was inherently media driven in nature — a hallmark of Virtual Orientalism's method" (101). The visual nature of Mahesh's projection in American popular culture is precisely what made his Orientalization all the more subtle yet powerful, because it "gave the American audience an illusory sense that they were experiencing Mahesh first-hand," while in fact such visualization was "rhetorically select[ed] and often reflect[ed] the audience's predetermined frames of reference" (108).

Virtual Orientalism's unveiling of the cultural mechanism that underlines the visual representation of Asia and Asian religions ends with arguably the most recognizable Oriental Monk figure — the Kung Fu Monk. It is through the creation of the hugely successful ABC television drama *Kung Fu* that the image of the Oriental Monk achieves its new significance. Iwamura persuasively reveals that the half-American half-Chinese monk Kwai Chang Caine (David Carradine) "served as a bridge figure by which an American audience could enter a *seemingly* foreign worldview with ease" (136 italics original). The significance of this cultural crossing lies in its breaking of the original pattern where cultural border-crossing is unilateral; in other words, the virtual imaginations of the Oriental Monk "transformed fictional characters into messengers of spiritual substance," who are "virtually real" in the American cultural consciousness (157).

Virtual Orientalism represents an inspiring effort to debunk the myth of Orientalism in American popular media. It offers a close examination of visual and print media products that helped to form the cultural apparatus of hegemonic Orientalization. This enlightening work would be of interest to both scholars of cultural studies, gender and media studies, and religious studies, but also general readers who are interested in how American popular culture interacts with Asia and Asian influence.

Works Cited

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